

A Snapshot of Sexual Violence Prevention Education in Vermont:

**Programs offered by K-12
schools and community-
based agencies**

April, 2008

**A Report from *The Vermont Approach*
Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force**

Executive Summary

In June, 2006 the Vermont Legislature asked the Anti-Violence Partnership: A Community Collaboration at the University of Vermont (AVP) to set up a multi-disciplinary Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force (SVPTF) to inventory school-based sexual violence prevention programs in the state. An additional mandate was to inform those who work in the area of sexual violence prevention about the 2006 consent law change and to gather feedback on that change. The work of the SVPTF intersects with the work of a second AVP project, *The Vermont Approach: A Strategic Plan for Comprehensive, Collaborative Sexual Violence Prevention in Vermont 2006-2010*.

Ninety-five of four hundred twenty seven schools representing pre-kindergarten to 12th grade levels completed the Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force Survey conducted in the fall of 2007, based on 2006-2007 school year information. Of the schools completing the survey, ninety were public schools and five were independent schools. **Schools from thirteen of the fourteen Vermont counties filled out the survey.** In addition, a corresponding survey was sent to thirty-seven community agencies statewide providing sexual violence prevention education programs. **Fifteen community agencies** completed the survey.

Key findings from the SVPTF surveys include:

- Sixty-five percent of reporting schools stated that they did not know about the changes in the consent law; 100% of reporting community agencies did know about the change
- The number of classroom hours spent on sexual violence prevention is low relative to the seriousness of the problem and its impact on students learning and well being.
- Community agencies most frequently cited partnerships with particular teachers or administrators as the most beneficial or successful aspect of their school-based prevention efforts.
- According to survey results, grade levels five and six are where most sexual violence prevention instruction occurs. Grades nine to twelve were the second most frequent grade level grouping where sexual violence education prevention takes place.

Recommendations include:

- Given survey numbers regarding schools' limited familiarity with the change in the consent law, Vermont needs 1) an annual multidisciplinary training on the consent law; and 2) a "legal literacy" public education campaign for youth and adults about the consent law.
- The SVPTF encourages the Vermont Department of Education and school administrators and school boards to increase the amount of time given to age appropriate sexual violence prevention education in the curriculum, across all grade levels.
- Statewide standards and resources must be allocated to help institutionalize what is currently inconsistent prevention programming; we can't sustain quality and consistency by relying on random partnerships, however strong, between particular schools personnel and community agency staff.
- The SVPTF recognizes that early childhood education providers represent a critical sector to survey, with specific experiences and needs. The SVPTF plans to recruit and involve representatives from that community in the spring of 2008, so as to effectively develop and implement a survey/assessment for that audience to be implemented in the fall of 2008.

As the Task Force stated in a preliminary report to the legislature earlier this year, *"By building upon the base of work that has already begun, and enhancing and expanding the capacity of schools, community-based agencies and parents to provide effective sexual violence awareness and prevention programming, we as a community have the potential to create significant change in how Vermonters think about and react to sexual violence."*

Introduction and Background:

In June, 2006 the Vermont Legislature asked the Anti-Violence Partnership: A Community Collaboration at the University of Vermont (AVP) to set up a Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force (SVPTF) to do an inventory of the sexual violence prevention programs in the state, particularly those that are delivered in schools. An additional mandate for the Task Force was to inform those who work in the area of sexual violence prevention that the law regarding age of consent had changed and to gather feedback on that change. The work of the SVPTF is part of *The Vermont Approach: A Strategic Plan for Comprehensive, Collaborative Sexual Violence Prevention in Vermont 2006-2010*.

After gathering for the first time in December 2006, the SVPTF met monthly for two hours starting in February 2007 to develop, design, and plan implementation of the survey instruments to conduct the inventory. (See Appendix A for the roster of members) The SVPTF established a timeline and work plan for a fall 2007 school year distribution of the survey. In some instances small ad-hoc committees would complete specific tasks, but the bulk of the work took place as a collaborative group process during the meetings and via email between meetings throughout the preliminary information-gathering and draft review process. The multidisciplinary mix of agency and community practitioners and researchers brought a good balance of perspectives to the table, offering rich and thorough discussion and a real commitment to achieve the legislative mandate and SVPTF goals.

The following figures from a variety of sources paint a picture of both the importance of understanding existing prevention education programming and the ongoing need to discern more effective and visible prevention strategies statewide. Incidents of all forms of sexual violence, from unwanted touching to rape and assault, persist in Vermont communities, with children and youth among the most vulnerable populations. It is believed that many complaints of sexual abuse, where evidence is not sufficient to proceed in a civil or criminal manner, may still be accurate. We also know that many occurrences go unreported, due to lack of information about services, fear, lack of trust in the system and/or absence of trusted and supportive adults.

Sexual violence by the numbers:

- More than 50% of reported sexual assaults nationally are experienced by girls 18 and under (National Violence Against Women Survey, 2000)
- Of surveyed men who were incarcerated for rape, 40% reported their victims were children, and 80% reported their victims were under 18 years old. (Greenfeld, Lawrence A. "Child Victimization: Violent Offenders and Their Victims." Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 1996.)
- There were 62 statutory rapes reported to police in Vermont in 2006. (Vermont Crime Information Center, Vermont Crime On Line, 2006)
- In 2006, there were 2,519 total reports of all types of abuse (physical, sexual, neglect, risk of harm) to the Vermont Department for Children and Families. There were 381 substantiated cases of child sexual abuse. (Vermont Dept. for Children and Families)
- There were 207 children and youth victims of sexual violence served by Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence programs in 2007. (Vermont Network 2007 annual report)

- In 2007, one out of ten students reported (11%) having been touched against their wishes sexually or forced to touch someone else sexually. Female students were over three times more likely than male students to report being touched or forced to touch someone else (17% vs 5%). (Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2007, Vermont Department of Health, completed by 8,543 students in grades 8-12)
- Thirty-four percent of Vermont girls in grades six through 12 responding to the second annual "What Girls Say" survey reported having been touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way and 21% reported experiencing sexual harassment. 89% have an adult in their life to whom they can turn for help and advise. (Girls Scout Council of Vermont and Vermont Commission on Women, 2007)
- A survey conducted with teens reported 42% believed that if a girl or guy have been drinking and are intoxicated, then it's not sexual assault if he forces or coerces her to have sex. (Attitude and Behavior Assessment Among Wisconsin High School Students, Wisc. Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2000)

Research Design and Implementation

The SVPTF reviewed the legislative language and discussed the mandated tasks. The first step in the development of the two surveys -- one for schools and the second for community-based agencies providing prevention programming in schools -- was to brainstorm parallel sets of content, with audience-specific variations. These included: curricula used, topics covered, outside trainers used, format, length and frequency of the prevention sessions, setting (e.g. classroom or assembly), grade level/audience, numbers of students/school personnel trained, professional development needs, schools and working relationships between schools and community-based trainers.

After thorough discussion and input from the research team (See Appendix A for roster of research team), the decision was made to focus on K-12 schools (public and independent) and community-based agencies, and not to extend the survey to the much larger population of early childhood education providers. To include the latter, would have potentially made the survey too broad in its focus and lead to a less meaningful data set. [See recommendations below.] Additionally, everyone agreed that the survey should specify a clear, uniform time period to which the respondents should refer when answering the questions; and decided that the September 2006 – June 2007 school year worked. Once the content was clear and focused, there was discussion about format design in order to gather effectively the information required and do so in an accessible, user-friendly format. The consensus was to use Survey Monkey as an electronic collection instrument, as it has been utilized by the Department of Education in the past. Hard copies were made available as well, although electronic responses were encouraged.

Once the development process was underway, the research team prepared the application for the University of Vermont human subject research review board. This process is required for all research projects conducted by UVM faculty and staff in order to comply with federal standards for confidentiality and safety of participants during the research, record-keeping and documentation and reports generated as a result of the research.

The SVPTF developed a cover letter to principals/heads of schools and community agency directors, with information about the survey purpose, suggestions to consider for which school personnel would most likely have the information necessary to complete the

survey, and instructions for how to access Survey Monkey. Early in September 2007, the Department of Education distributed an email announcement to principals regarding the pending survey distribution. The community-based agency mailing list was generated from the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence programs, child advocacy centers and other state and local sexual violence prevention organizations.

The distribution date was set for September 28, 2007, with an October 26 completion deadline. Once the actual mail distribution was completed, the return date was extended to November 9, 2007 due to the volume of calls from schools receiving the bulk mail distribution later than anticipated.

Throughout October and November, research staff was available to answer survey technical assistance calls and questions coming in from schools and community agencies. Graduate assistants hand entered the small number of paper copies of the survey submitted by programs and schools with minimal or no internet access.

Findings

Demographics of survey respondents

School survey. Ninety-five of four hundred twenty seven schools statewide completed all or a portion of the survey representing thirteen of the fourteen counties in Vermont. Of the schools who took the survey 90 stated they were public schools and five identified themselves as an independent school. Sixty-four of the schools completing the survey identified themselves as pre-kindergarten to grade eight. Seven schools stated they were pre-kindergarten through grades 12 and 23 were middle and secondary schools (grades 6-12). One school did not answer the question. The school survey was completed mostly by administrators followed by guidance counselors, teachers, school nurses and "other".

Community based agency survey. Survey responses were received from 15 of 37 organizations to which the survey was sent. The responding organizations are located in eight counties across the state, one of which provides programming statewide. Responses represented ten agencies from the Vermont Network against Domestic and Sexual Violence, two child advocacy centers and three other antiviolence or educational agencies.

Change in consent law.

Of the schools responding to the question regarding knowing about the change in the Vermont sexual consent law, 65% reported not knowing about the changes in the law while 35% reported that they were aware of the changes in the law. In contrast 100% of the community based agencies reported knowing about the change in the consent law.

Sexual violence prevention education

Grade levels. According to school survey results grade levels five and six are where most sexual violence prevention instruction occurs, however, the community based agency survey yielded different results. Community based agencies reported that a majority of topics they presented occurred in seventh and eighth grades. Grades nine to 12 were reported by

both schools and community based agencies as the second most frequent grade levels where sexual violence prevention education takes place. Both the school and the community based survey reported the grade levels of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten were the ages where the least sexual violence prevention education happens.

Setting for sexual violence prevention education. Sixty-eight percent of schools reporting stated that sexual violence prevention education occurred as a part of the health curriculum. Guidance services and school counseling were the second and third most reported settings in which sexual violence prevention education happened in the schools. Community based agency results differed slightly from the school survey. The most frequent setting for community based agencies to educate about sexual violence prevention in the schools was "other class settings" followed by health education classes. In addition to teaching in schools, agencies also reported teaching in teen centers and in partnership with the Vermont Department of Children and Families.

Sexual Violence Prevention Topics Taught. Survey results revealed the **top five sexual violence prevention topics covered by schools** were:

- explaining how bullying, hazing, and harassment affect others,
- practicing communication skills,
- when and how to ask for help when needed,
- understanding the right to personal privacy, and
- healthy ways to identify and express needs and emotions.

The **five topics that received the least amount of instruction** were:

- self-defense skills,
- male accountability,
- models of masculinity,
- understanding the age of consent, and
- understanding the legal definitions of criminal sexual behavior.

The **top topics offered by community based agencies** were:

- explaining how bullying, hazing and harassment affect others,
- when and how to ask for help when needed, and
- how to disclose and to whom to disclose.

The **least offered topics** were:

- self-defense skills,
- understanding anatomically correct names of body parts,
- male accountability,
- models of masculinity,
- identifying rules for interactions with strangers,
- identifying personal boundaries with strangers.

Hours spent. The number of hours spent teaching about sexual violence prevention in schools varied greatly. The most frequently reported **time spent on sexual violence prevention was six to 10 classroom hours** during the 2006-2007 school year. Community based agencies reported that **60 minutes was the most frequent length of time for a presentation session** in schools.

Relationship between schools and agencies. Community based agencies were asked about challenges and successes of working with schools in providing sexual violence prevention education. Community based agencies most frequently cited **partnerships with particular teachers or administrators as the most beneficial or successful aspect of their school-based prevention efforts**. The biggest barrier/challenge to agencies in providing sexual violence prevention education was funding, followed by No Child Left Behind mandates. Additional challenges were the need to be flexible around time required for their presentations and the barriers associated with getting into schools. The following quote illustrates one of the challenges faced by community based agencies in their sexual violence prevention education efforts:

“School time is at a premium due to the pressure teachers are under to fit the standards into their short days and time slots. We have had to get very creative and persistent in order to build relationships with the schools over time.”

Professional development requests. At the conclusion of the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to express what additional training and topics of interest would be beneficial to increase their capacity to offer sexual violence prevention education. Respondents from **schools** described a number of different **professional development needs**. The five most reported requests were:

- how to recognize signs of sexual abuse in students,
- managing sexually reactive behaviors,
- curriculum issues regarding sexual violence prevention,
- how to deliver parent education, and
- training for teachers.

Community based agencies expressed the desire for updated statistics around reported rape and sexual assault, specifically local statistics. Respondents also expressed an interest in support surrounding “how to create effective community partnerships with schools”, which included the challenge of the choice schools have of pre-fabricated curricula over those offered by local agencies.

Analysis of data

The results of the surveys give a snapshot of the sexual violence prevention education occurring in the Vermont pre-kindergarten to 12 grade schools.

Consent. One significant difference between schools and community agencies was in their knowledge about changes in the consent law. Only 35% of the schools reported knowing about the changes in the consent versus 100% of the community based agencies. A possible explanation for this finding is that the community based agencies that filled out the survey work more closely with sexual assault laws through their work with law enforcement and victims than do schools. Another factor may be that community based agencies who provide sexual violence prevention education are more often involved with sexual violence public policy, thus, they are better informed about laws or changes in the laws. In contrast schools are not as closely linked with sexual violence laws and policies.

Sexual Violence Prevention. Results of both the school survey and the community survey revealed some consistencies about what sexual violence prevention education is

being taught in pre-kindergarten to grade 12 schools. One such consistency was the most commonly taught topics related to sexual violence prevention. Both schools and community based agencies reported that bullying, hazing, and harassment was the most frequent topic taught. This result is not surprising due to Act 117 which requires schools to develop a comprehensive bullying plan. This mandate may influence curriculum decisions such as subjects taught. The Vermont Health Grade Expectations, published by the Vermont Department of Education, also provide insight why certain topics emerged as top subjects discussed. For example, subject matter such as communication skills, knowing when to ask for help, and healthy ways to identify and express needs and emotions are found in the Vermont Health Grade Expectations.

One difference in survey results were the grade levels in which sexual violence is taught. The schools report that they most frequently teach sexual violence prevention to grades five and six while community based agencies report presenting sexual violence prevention education to grades seven and eight. These findings may be explained because schools might feel more confident in teaching younger students about sexual violence issues because the content is often about general self awareness, empowerment and safety. As students get older and may experience more sexual violence due to increases in sexual activity schools may feel ill-equipped to teach about the subject, thus, relying on outside resources with greater expertise to teach about these issues.

The number of classroom hours spent on sexual violence prevention is low relative to the seriousness of the problem and its impact on students learning and well being. The pressure to increase math, science and reading scores on standardized tests to meet requirements of No Child Left Behind and Vermont State Standards may explain why little instruction may be given to sexual violence prevention topics, problematic since these topics are included in the Vermont Health Grade Expectations. Additionally, throughout the state there are different community standards about what can be taught. Schools find themselves spending more time on math, science, and reading instruction to improve test scores which means the amount of time allotted to teach sexual violence prevention education is minimal. Schools may also find it difficult to measure the gains of sexual violence prevention efforts, as opposed to the more easily quantified measure of increased scores in tests.

Relationship between school and community based agencies. One of the barriers stated by community based agencies was access to schools. Several of the survey respondents reported that they had personal connections with a particular teacher or administrator which help them gain access to the school, (a possible indicator of these kinds of working relationships may be the numbers for "other class setting" where prevention sessions occur). Without a personal connection, access to classrooms might be difficult. These personal relationships can put sexual violence prevention education in jeopardy if either the teacher or the community agency staff members decides to leave their position. No Child Left Behind mandates may also explain why gaining access to schools is challenging. If more time is spent on math, science and reading curriculum then less time is spent on sexual violence prevention education in turn limiting the time and or access community based agencies may have to present sexual violence education in schools.

Another barrier mentioned was limited funding. This result is not surprising considering low levels of funding that agencies receive for prevention efforts. Low levels of

funding impact how many staff members community based agencies can hire to conduct sexual violence education in the schools and affects the resources they can direct towards preventative vs. reactive sexual violence work.

Professional Development. The professional development needs between schools and community based agencies that provide sexual violence education differ. Schools reported needing more training on signs and symptoms of abuse and how to manage sexually reactive behaviors while community based agencies stated the need for knowledge of state and local statistics and how to work with schools to deliver sexual violence prevention education.

This difference in professional development needs reflects the nature of the work that the two groups perform. Since schools work with children on a daily basis and are responsible for managing behaviors so all students can learn it is logical that they are in need of ways to manage sexually reactive behaviors. The need for recognizing signs and symptoms of abuse is also understandable since teachers and other school personnel are mandated child abuse reporters. Another professional development need stated by schools was sexual violence prevention education curriculum issues, such as age appropriate materials and effective teaching methods. All of the major professional development needs are not surprising because in teacher education programs new teachers are often not given information about recognizing signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse, managing sexual reactive behavior or how to teach sexual violence prevention.

The need for Vermont and local statistics by community based agencies is also understandable. Having knowledge of state and local statistics helps agencies educate schools about the need for prevention programming. These factors impact how one focuses education and prevention efforts. Gaining skills in how to partner with schools was another professional development request by community based agencies. This need is not surprising since community based agencies reported that gaining access to schools was a barrier in providing sexual violence prevention education.

Recommendations

Based on survey results and an examination of sexual violence prevention literature the SVPTF makes the following recommendations:

Consent law education. Given the survey numbers regarding limited familiarity with the change in the consent law, and the collective experience of SVPTF members in their respective agencies and disciplines, it is strongly recommended that the Legislature earmark funds for the SVPTF to both:

- plan and implement a multidisciplinary statewide training format on the consent law; and
- create a statewide "legal literacy" public education campaign for youth and adults about the consent law.

Prioritize sexual violence prevention education in the curriculum. The SVPTF encourages the Vermont Department of Education and school administrators and school

boards to increase the amount of time given to healthy sexuality and sexual violence prevention education in the curriculum. Sexual violence prevention education should be occurring at all grade levels and its content should be age appropriate, including parents in the process. It is also recommended that schools and community based agencies work together in developing, implementing, and delivering sexual violence curriculum in schools. This collaboration would enable agencies to share their knowledge of sexual violence prevention and for schools to apply their expertise of various teaching methods and assessment.

Systematic, sustainable school and community based agency relations. It is recommended that schools and community based agencies develop more systematic and sustainable relationships that will endure even when a particular teacher or agency staff member leaves their position. By establishing more systematic relationships it ensures that partnerships between the school and the agency will continue.

A more established relationship between schools and community based agencies would also provide opportunities for joint development of sexual violence prevention education curriculum and teacher in-service training. For example, community based agencies could provide teacher in-service training on reporting signs and symptoms of sexual violence and managing sexually reactive behaviors. By combining resources schools and community based agencies could more effectively provide sexual violence education to students and parents.

For all the above reasons the SVPTF recommends that schools and community based agencies work at establishing systematic partnerships to better utilize resources, areas of expertise, and to ensure a more comprehensive approach to sexual violence prevention.

Enhance professional development opportunities. Both school personnel and community-based prevention education programs would benefit from the Department of Education collaborating with organizations like the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence and Prevent Child Abuse Vermont and Vermont college and university teacher education programs to conduct an annual multidisciplinary training on sexual violence prevention education strategies and skills.

Continue SVPTF/Vermont Approach Funding. In recognition of the importance of the on-going tasks of the SVPTF and *The Vermont Approach*, the \$130,000 designated by the Legislature to the Anti-Violence Partnership at the University of Vermont for this purpose be appropriated and allocated for at least each of the three remaining years of the mandated period (through state fiscal year 2010.)

Future research with early childhood education providers. In response to the report of the Legislature's Pre-Kindergarten Education Study Committee Report (February 2007) and the SVPTF's own discussions, the SVPTF recognizes early childhood education providers represent a critical sector to survey, with specific experiences and needs. The SVPTF plans to recruit and involve representatives from that community in the spring of 2008, so as to effectively develop and implement a survey/assessment for that audience to be implemented in the fall of 2008.

Conclusion

Reducing sexual violence in Vermont communities requires community-wide involvement and accountability to create needed cultural change about attitudes toward healthy and safe relationships. Schools represent only one institution needing the resources and support to take on this effort.

The survey results described in this report provide a helpful snapshot of both successes and challenges for school-based sexual violence prevention. This information shaped the recommendations made by the Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force, and will also form the basis of the on-going implementation strategies based on those recommendations, and additional recommendations as they emerge from the Task Force's work. **As stated in a preliminary report to the legislature earlier this year,**

“By building upon the base of work that has already begun, and enhancing and expanding the capacity of schools, community-based agencies and parents to provide effective sexual violence awareness and prevention programming, we as a community have the potential to create significant change in how Vermonters think about and react to sexual violence. “

NOTE: Copies of the school and community agency survey texts are available by contacting Anne Liske at the Anti-Violence Partnership at the University of Vermont, email anne.liske@uvm.edu or call 802-656-4322.

Appendix A. The Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force

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Donna McAllister, Health Education Consultant, Department of Education
Justin Morgan-Parmett, Program Coordinator, Project Safe Choices: Challenging
Young Men's Violence, Spectrum's Domestic Abuse Education Project
Kathryn O'Neill, HIV Prevention Coordinator, Safe and Healthy Schools, Vermont
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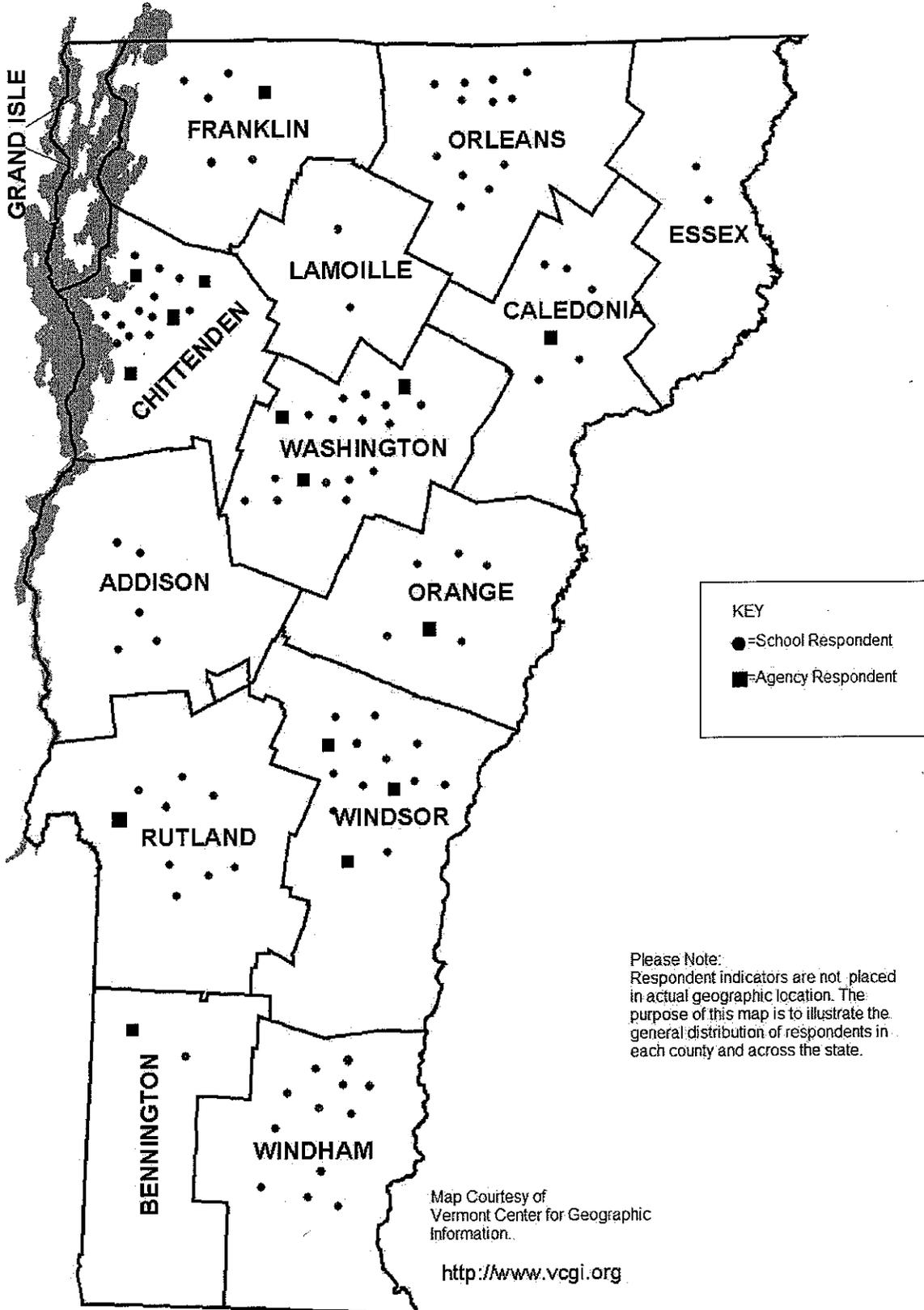
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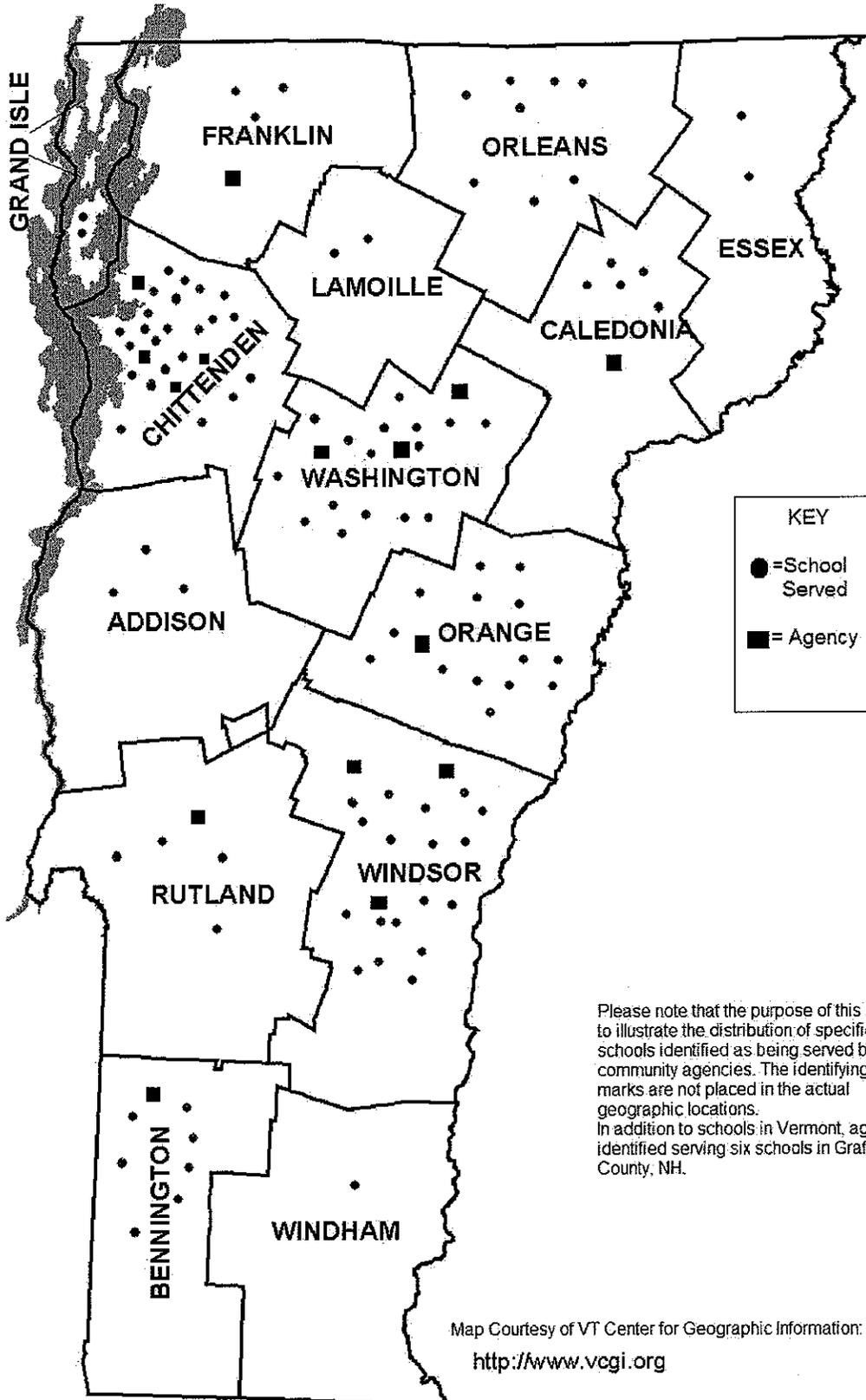
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SVPTF Survey School and Community Agency Respondents by County



SVPTF Survey Schools Served by Community Agency Survey Respondents



Please note that the purpose of this map is to illustrate the distribution of specific schools identified as being served by community agencies. The identifying marks are not placed in the actual geographic locations. In addition to schools in Vermont, agencies identified serving six schools in Grafton County, NH.

Map Courtesy of VT Center for Geographic Information:
<http://www.vcgi.org>